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ABSTRACT

Setting high academic standards and achieving against them is an important educational objective. Academic standards should originate within the student's community; be used to measure student achievement and school performance; be shared and understood by all members of the community; and be both explicit and comprehensible to lay people. The process of adopting standards is itself important because it can both strengthen content and increase public acceptance of those standards. The process should be participatory and inclusive. The Rural School and Community Trust encourages development of three kinds of learning standards: (1) content standards that establish what the community expects the child to accomplish and that are high enough to challenge each student; (2) context standards that provide a pedagogy of place using the community and native environment as curriculum; and (3) learning condition standards that assure an appropriate learning environment. There is a danger that standards can turn schools into agencies of social control for the politically or economically dominant. The relationship between high standards and equity is important to rural communities because small schools can be closed in the name of raising standards and improving educational opportunity when, in fact, the objective is to lower costs per pupil. This bias against small schools exists despite the evidence that they perform well, especially in lower socioeconomic communities. Academic standards should be used to accomplish the goal of equal educational opportunity, not to artfully deny it. (TD)

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STANDARDS IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

A Policy Statement of the Rural School and Community Trust

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STANDARDS IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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The Rural School and Community Trust Perspective

In Brief: **Strong local communities are the best habitat for excellence in education and education is the responsibility of the whole community. Setting high academic standards and achieving against those standards is an important educational objective, but the quest for higher standards can be exploited to serve other purposes. This statement sets out the Rural Trust's general view of this important policy issue.**

The Rural School and Community Trust is rooted in the belief that strong local communities are the best habitat for excellence in education. From our perspective, every community is a richly detailed place able to provide a laboratory for learning, children are young citizens whose work in school should serve to improve their community, and education is the responsibility of the whole community, not only of professional educators. How does this philosophy respond to the call for high academic standards in public schools?

Setting high academic standards and achieving against those standards is an important educational objective that is now widely held. The standards movement is diverse, including many business and political leaders, professional educators, cultural activists, and others. It is motivated by many concerns about the direction and effectiveness of America's schools.

The policy debates surrounding standards are closely tied to school finance reform and governance, teacher education, school accreditation, and other issues. With this central role comes the risk that the quest for higher standards can be exploited to serve other political purposes. Standards can help achieve excellence. Misused, they can serve less worthy purposes. All concerned with education policy and practice should be deliberate in their approach to standards.

This statement sets out the Rural Trust's general view of this important policy issue. We invite critical responses to this statement from those – especially rural people – that have different perspectives from our own.

Whose Standards Matter?

In Brief: **Students should internalize the highest standards of excellence in the pursuit of knowledge and in the development of the judgment needed to apply that knowledge. These standards should originate within the community in which the student lives; they should be used to measure the student's achievement and the school's performance; they should be widely shared and understood by all members of the community; and they should be both explicit and comprehensible to laypeople. Standards should include the broader learning standards of a fully developed community with an educational mission to help all people develop their intellectual capacity. The process of adopting standards is itself important because it can both strengthen content and increase public acceptance of those standards. The process should be participatory and inclusive, and genuine in both.**

Standards should originate within the community in which the student lives; they should be used to measure the student's achievement and the school's performance; they should be widely shared and understood by all members of the community; and they should be both explicit and comprehensible to laypersons. Students should internalize the highest standards of excellence in the pursuit of knowledge and in the development of the judgment needed to apply that knowledge.

For a long time, public schools in America have operated under standards that do not meet these requirements. There are ***de facto*** standards that result from the interaction of discipline-based professional associations, testing services, textbook companies, and institutions of higher education. There are also the ***surrogate*** standards that regulate the ways and means of schooling – school accreditation, teacher certification, building permits, federal aid guidelines, and state school finance formula. For too long, too much attention has been placed on prescribing the machinery of education. Clearly, the great potential of the standards movement is to restore to local communities real autonomy in the conduct and performance of public education. But to accomplish this, schools and communities must be largely freed from such *de facto* and surrogate standards and inspired instead to focus on results in student achievement and development.

That inspiration should originate from the community that surrounds the child and fills his or her experience with meaning. Teachers need to teach from the experience of the community to intellectually rigorous standards. In this cause, the importance of local educational role models cannot be overemphasized. Parents, teachers, administrators, civic, business, and spiritual leaders, and other adults with whom a child has direct daily contact either nourish high standards or starve them. The challenge for the standards movement is not merely to coax adoption of nominally high standards in every school, but to generate real operationally high standards from within every community in the nation.

In fact, the high standards we envision here are not limited to the academic standards that should be at work in the schoolhouse. Instead, they should include the broader learning standards of a fully developed community with an educational mission to help all people develop their intellectual capacity. In such a community, the school will certainly be an integral part of education, but not the exclusive institution for achieving community educational goals. The community serves as the functional model of both the standards and their application, within the school and without.

Of course, local control can be – and often has been – badly abused by powerful local interests driven by racism, ethnic or religious bigotry, vested economic interests, or social privileges. State and federal officials must be vigilant in the protection of civil rights and civil liberties to assure that local control of academic standards is not misused to violate the human rights that form the foundation for our society. Neither local control nor high standards is an acceptable excuse for using public schools to enforce social injustices, to teach discrimination, or to counsel hatred.

Even where such dark forces are not a factor, we are not naïve about the willingness, enthusiasm, and capacity of local communities to meet the challenge of high standards. The fiber of community throughout our society has been badly weakened, and even where the will to perform is strong, the fiscal and social resources are often strained. Many communities who are willing to face the daunting challenge of developing high local standards will find the inequities and inadequacies of school finance systems in many states even more unbearable. High standards, made fully operational in every school reaching every child, will require the states to accept full responsibility for assuring that resources are equitably distributed so that the opportunity to perform to high standards is not dependent on where a child is born or where her parents choose to live.

It is also very important that states play a central role in helping local communities by offering opportunities for cross-community cooperation, idea sharing, and interaction in developing their own standards. We hope communities think about their place and their importance in a national and global community, and benefit from understanding approaches taken by other peoples in other places. Our call for community standards is not a call for isolationism or provincialism.

Finally, the process of adopting standards is itself important because it can both strengthen content and increase public acceptance of those standards. The process should be participatory and inclusive, and genuine in both. We are aware that it is easy to manipulate "public input," and to dismiss or discount those whose views are controversial or curious. But a patient, open process will produce standards that can be supported, and are more likely to be achieved than those produced in haste by disingenuous means.

It is therefore especially important that standards be both explicit and comprehensible to those whose work is most directly affected by them: children, parents, and teachers. All should be able to see plainly whether a student is progressing against these standards. They must "own" the standards under which they work, and it is more important that they understand and believe in those standards than that those standards are "high" in official estimation. To borrow a phrase from Thomas Jefferson, "Self government is always better than good government."

Still, some communities will doubtless be slow to respond to the call for standards. Their pace and performance will frustrate many that believe high standards should be imposed if not eagerly adopted. But we caution that substituting authoritarian approaches to the adoption of standards will produce superficial results. Patient work within local communities is preferred for effective results.

Three Kinds of Standards

In Brief: **The Rural School and Community Trust encourages development of three kinds of learning standards: (1) *Content Standards* that establish what the community expects the child to accomplish and are high enough to be challenging for each student; (2) *Context Standards* that provide a pedagogy of place using the community and the native environment as curriculum and as filter for content standards; and (3) *Learning Condition Standards* that assure appropriate learning conditions, such as the physical environment, access to school facilities and opportunity to participate in school activities, the right of each student to be known and valued as a member of the school community, and the right of each student to participate in school decision making.**

The Rural Trust encourages development of three kinds of learning standards:

- **Content Standards:** These standards should establish what the community expects the child to accomplish. They must be high enough to be challenging for each student. The level of specificity in the standards should be pragmatic. Content standards can be unrealistically prescriptive and dangerously naïve about pedagogical limitations. Zeal is no substitute for developmentally appropriate rigor in academic standards. There is a danger that unrealistic standards will ultimately be ignored, and the result contrary to the purpose of achieving high performance. Content standards should focus on the capabilities sought in the students, not on the minutia of data to be transmitted to them. They should be inspirational to teachers, not dictatorial. There are many models of good

content standards, and unfortunately, quite a few models of bad ones.

- **Context Standards**. Every school should be well rooted in a locale, and that locale should provide the context within which students learn. Context standards should provide for a pedagogy of place using the community and the native environment as curriculum and as filter for content standards. Context standards should provide for transmitting knowledge about the particular place the school inhabits, and about the importance of all places as habitats for community and for learning. They should aim at preparing students to accept responsibility for becoming good citizens wherever they choose to live; they should address the skill requirements for living well in a sustainable community; and they should free children to choose to leave or to stay in their native place. They should take advantage of native ways of knowing and learning, provide for the opportunity to learn from knowledgeable and wise people in the community, including those not certified to teach, and equip children to live in their own cultural environment as well as others. We want to be clear Context standards are not about loyalty to a particular place. They are about learning to function responsibly with the other people with whom one shares a place. There are some examples of excellent context standards, including the Alaska Standards for Culturally Responsive Schools developed by the Alaska Rural Systemic Initiative, a partner in the Rural School and Community Trust.

- **Learning Condition Standards**. Every school should establish standards that assure appropriate learning conditions. Like other standards, these should originate in the community, not in an external authority. They should address issues such as the physical condition of the school, its location, a safe and healthy environment, the means and nature of transportation to and from school, and the child's access to school facilities. But they should address much more, such as the student's opportunity to participate in school activities, his or her right to be known and valued as a member of the school community, and to participate in school decision making as a laboratory for democratic living. Learning condition standards should define the school as a place of learning for all people in the community, a place where everyone is a "student," and everyone is welcome to learn, including adults. A school that is too often closed, or too distant or too isolated from the community and the people it serves, or too impersonal, will not provide a learning environment that is conducive to achieving high academic standards, any more than one that is cold, dark, and unsafe. Many rural schools that have been closed provided better learning conditions than the sterile, safe, architecturally excellent buildings that replaced them. Except where the safety of children is palpably at risk, local learning condition standards should have precedence over state facilities guidelines.

Content, context, and learning condition standards, closely integrated, will provide a measure for high academic achievement that is rooted in the character and personal strengths of the people the student knows and trusts most. The student will be at home with these standards, not a stranger to them.

Why Are Standards Important and Potentially Dangerous?

In Brief: **The struggle to achieve to high standards builds intellectual character that transcends the accomplishment itself. There is, however, a danger that standards can be used to establish "official knowledge," a state-determined correctness that damages intellectual integrity. We are concerned, for example, when we hear high academic standards justified as a means of standardizing our society into the Anglo-American culture, or when singular emphasis is placed on standards as a means of competing in a global economy. Standards should not turn schools into agencies of social control for the politically or economically dominant.**

High academic standards are important because, when they are met, the student has a fund of knowledge upon which to exercise judgment. But they are also important because they encourage rigorous intellectual habits. The struggle to achieve to high standards builds intellectual character that transcends the accomplishment itself. Producing to high standards may also generate ancillary benefits, such as greater capacity to adjust to social changes, to contribute to the economy, or to exercise civic responsibility. These ancillary benefits are by-products of the strong character, rigorous habits, and good judgment that high academic standards nourish.

There is, however, a danger that standards can be used to establish "official knowledge," a state-determined correctness that dampens intellectual curiosity and undermines discourse, dulling judgment, delaying intellectual maturity, and retarding pedagogical innovation. Some aspects of the current debate over high academic standards concern us with respect to these potential dangers.

We are concerned, for example, when we hear arguments justifying standards as a means of standardizing our society into the Anglo-American culture. This view has a long history, and it played a role in the origins of the common school, but we believe it is a misguided view. America, including rural America, has been and continues to be enriched by immigration and diversity. The challenge is to establish unity among people of differing backgrounds and views, not conformity of mind and conscience or dominance of any ethnic group over others. Unity produces common ground; conformity produces weak and vacillating values. Standards should not make us all wear one hat, or turn schools into agencies of social control for the politically or economically dominant.

We are also concerned when singular emphasis is placed on standards as a means of competing in a global economy. We believe, as do many business people concerned about the future of American public schools, that standards must count for much more than competitiveness. Even within the realm of work, employees must have diverse skills including human relations and communications skills. And in a larger sense, education must be about fulfillment of the whole person if it is to serve national economic goals, whether in a local or a global economy.

Standards and Equity

In Brief: **Standards help define the limits of state government's responsibility to provide equal educational opportunity to children and can therefore be used or misused to shape legislative and judicial decisions affecting equity. The relationship between high standards and equity is very important to rural communities because small schools can be closed in the name of raising standards and improving educational opportunity when, in fact, the objective is nothing more than to lower costs per pupil. This bias against small schools exists despite the evidence that small schools perform well, and especially in lower socio-economic communities.**

State government must empower every community with the legitimate authority and the resources necessary to provide an equal educational opportunity to every child. Providing educational opportunity is the responsibility of the community, and equal access to it is the right of every child. Standards help define the limits of those august rights and responsibilities. And because they do, they can be used and misused to shape legislative and judicial efforts to achieve equity for all children.

It is tempting, for example, for states to use standards not as a measure of the *minimum* adequate

education to which everyone is entitled, but as the *maximum* level of education the state is willing to guarantee children in poor communities. Some state officials fear runaway costs if access to an academic program with high standards is a matter of right. To reassure them, some standards advocates have been too quick to assert that achievement to high standards can be accomplished with reforms that cost nothing, or even reduce spending. Of course, that is sometimes true. But sometimes, producing to higher standards will cost more. Indeed, the cost of producing to high standards is likely to vary from place to place, depending on social and demographic conditions. If standards are set high, and no effort is made to assess the true cost of producing to these standards, then standards may become nothing more than the sad means of documenting further failures of public schools. We should not be glib about the cost of education, and we should not pander to those who will take advantage of any situation to justify lowering spending in public schools. Neither high standards nor adequate funding for schools should be sacrificed for the other. In effect, higher standards require public schools to accomplish a different purpose than they have been expected to accomplish in the past. We need to know what it will cost to meet that purpose. It is not enough to say that it is just a matter of no-cost reforms, especially in poor communities.

The relationship between high standards and equity is not, of course, a "rural" issue *per se*, but it is very close to the heart of rural education because of the widespread and unfounded bias against small schools. Unfortunately, small schools can be closed in the name of raising standards and improving educational opportunity, when in fact the objective is to achieve nothing more than lower costs per pupil, often at the expense of rural communities. Here, the weight of the evidence is clearly on the side of small schools. Research indicates that the lower the socio-economic status of the community served (rural or urban), the more important small schools are to student academic achievement. America should outgrow its infatuation with bigness in schools, and the sooner the better, if educational excellence and equity are important to us.

No Excuse for Mediocrity

In Brief: **Our concerns about standards are not to be taken as an excuse for mediocrity. Assessments that are linked to standards and are used to measure students' progress against the standards (not against other students) and to give guidance to their teachers can help make the standards effective and avoid mediocrity. Genuinely high academic standards, in content, context, and condition, linked to assessments that measure a child's intellectual growth, her or his teachers' performance, and their school's effectiveness, will move mountains in the effort to restore confidence in our schools. And the challenge is to do so for all children, no matter where they live, how wealthy their parents or their neighbors are, the color of their skin, or the language they speak at home. For all communities, but especially for rural communities, it is important that these standards originate in the community and be rooted in local wisdom, experience, and place. Such standards will benefit children, schools, and communities by building on their shared strengths and challenging them to accept responsibility for themselves and each other.**

We want to make it clear that these legitimate concerns about potential misuses of standards are not intended as an excuse for mediocrity, or to comfort those who oppose adequate funding for education, or who deny the state's duty to assure equal opportunity, or who are ready to abandon public schools and at-risk children altogether. We have heard all these political interests expressed as opposition to standards. We are not on their side. The challenge for every teacher, school, and community is to develop and teach a curriculum that reaches high academic standards while encouraging intellectual curiosity, inspiring wholesome debate, airing controversial views, preparing children to sing

as well as to make money, and encouraging respect for all. And the challenge is to do so for all children, no matter where they live, how wealthy their parents or their neighbors ar , the color of their skin, or the language they speak at home. We are deeply committed to equal educational opportunity, and our concern about standards is that they be used skillfully to accomplish that goal, and not artfully to deny it.

By the same token, we want to be clear that we support assessments that are linked to standards and are used to measure students' progress and to give guidance to their teachers. Student assessments are also a valuable means of measuring the effectiveness of a school and its reform efforts. Assessments and especially standardized tests take on an insidious nature, however, when they are used to rank children against each other rather than against standards. Such norm-referenced tests engender unhealthy forms of competition without measuring actual progress in the student's personal intellectual development. They are the antithesis of testing for achievement against an absolute standard, whether that absolute standard is the student's own past performance or an expected outcome. And it is achievement against an absolute standard that is the logic of any standard.

The standards movement raises crucial issues for American public education. It is essential that the public response be thoughtful and effective. Genuinely high academic standards, in content, context, and condition, linked to assessments that measure a child's intellectual growth, her or his teachers' performance, and their school's effectiveness, will move mountains in the effort to restore confidence in our schools. For all communities, but especially for rural communities, it is important that these standards originate in the community and be rooted in local wisdom, experience, and place. Such standards will benefit children, schools, and communities by building on their shared strengths and challenging them to accept responsibility for themselves and each other.

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